

Wanni: Scourge of deadly landmines lie ahead

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By Christy Richards

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The primary immediate factors are the return of the Wanni families to their homes, farms and the activities of the community as early as possible. In this the major hazardous obstacle will be landmines, a horrendous nightmare reality that has to be faced and deactivated.

The resettlement under no circumstances should be hurried and in this, the responsibility to make Wanni free of landmines lies with the government; and Sri Lanka needs a great deal of help to clear landmines. Apart from the countries that may come forward to help, overseas church agencies should canvas support for this activity from their respective governments as a matter of urgency. Also apart from the local non-governmental organization, the overseas missions that founded the various churches in Sri Lanka like the American, Anglican, Methodist, Dutch Reformed and the Baptist have an important role to play in this respect.

The Wanni needs overseas volunteers especially technicians who can handle this scourge to be posted to every township and farm village to ensure the whole area is freed of landmines that lurk in the ground with their evil killer potential.

Those of us who are familiar with the work of the Congregational Mission of the USA that has been active in Jaffna since 1816 when its mission was founded at Tellipallai are of the view that it has a key responsibility to be involved with its successor in Sri Lanka, the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India.

Mission hospitals like the Green Memorial and McLeod Hospitals should be specially equipped to meet the needs of victims of landmines. Demining and education alone will not solve the problem. In Cambodia villages have been provided with plastic sheaths designed to cover stumps to restrict blood loss until medical treatment could be rushed as soon as possible. The availability of artificial limbs is another factor.

During my visits to Cambodia I have seen how landmines still continue to affect the people there. This was also true of Vietnam where a great deal of these horrible bombs were sprayed by enemy forces without any consideration whatsoever for the civilian population. Even after the cessation of hostilities there hundreds of people perished as a result of landmine blasts.

In Cambodia I have seen children with arms that have been blown off by landmines, legless men dragging themselves in the streets of Phnom Penh, smashed up women farmers being packed in coffins and the danger of blasts ever present in the countryside, a cruel landmine legacy of the war. A rickshaw driver was killed in Phnom Penh when a bag of mines he was carrying for a female passenger exploded as they rode along a busy street. The woman had reportedly been given them by her soldier husband to sell. We should ensure landmines or any other deadly weapon from entering into the culture of the community.

It was once stated that in Cambodia anywhere between four million and ten million landmines have been placed in the ground and a few years ago, about 300 people were either killed or injured whenever blasts occurred on being tramped on them.

These mines hold even greater danger to cattle and other livestock as they go grazing in the open let alone the wild life that are affected by these mines. No less deadly than the professionally produced mines, are those manufactured in the jungle consisting only of a tin can packed with explosives and a battery, peppered with pieces of metal for extra destructive power.

Cambodian deminers reported that for every 236 people of the population there was one direct casualty and hardly any family was unaffected by landmines. It is also reported that some 30 per cent of the 500,000 tonnes of bombs dropped by the US during the Vietnam War remains unexploded presenting an ever present hazard. Five years ago US refused to sign the global ban on landmines treaty in Ottawa.

Politics of violence apart, it is important that the people of the Wanni must return to their homes. One is certain that there will be tremendous sympathy for this cause and the way many individuals, churches and other organizations responded to the tsunami catastrophe, there will not be any shortfall of help and support with the Wanni disaster too.

A great deal of dedicated and committed stewardship will be called for and it is a matter of encouragement that the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India under the leadership of Bishop Danny Thiagarajah is addressing itself as its primary mission, the rehabilitation, redevelopment and reconciliation in the Wanni. This is an awesome challenge no doubt and when the spirit of the community prevails, this work will have its great rewards in the service of people in need.

Our spirit of humanity will be defined by how religious, non-governmental and government organizations will work together as one body to bring new life and hope to the people of Wanni. Therein will also lie the redeeming features that will bring Sri Lanka to the spirit of peace and harmony.